

2004 Expanded Bear Hunting Opportunity

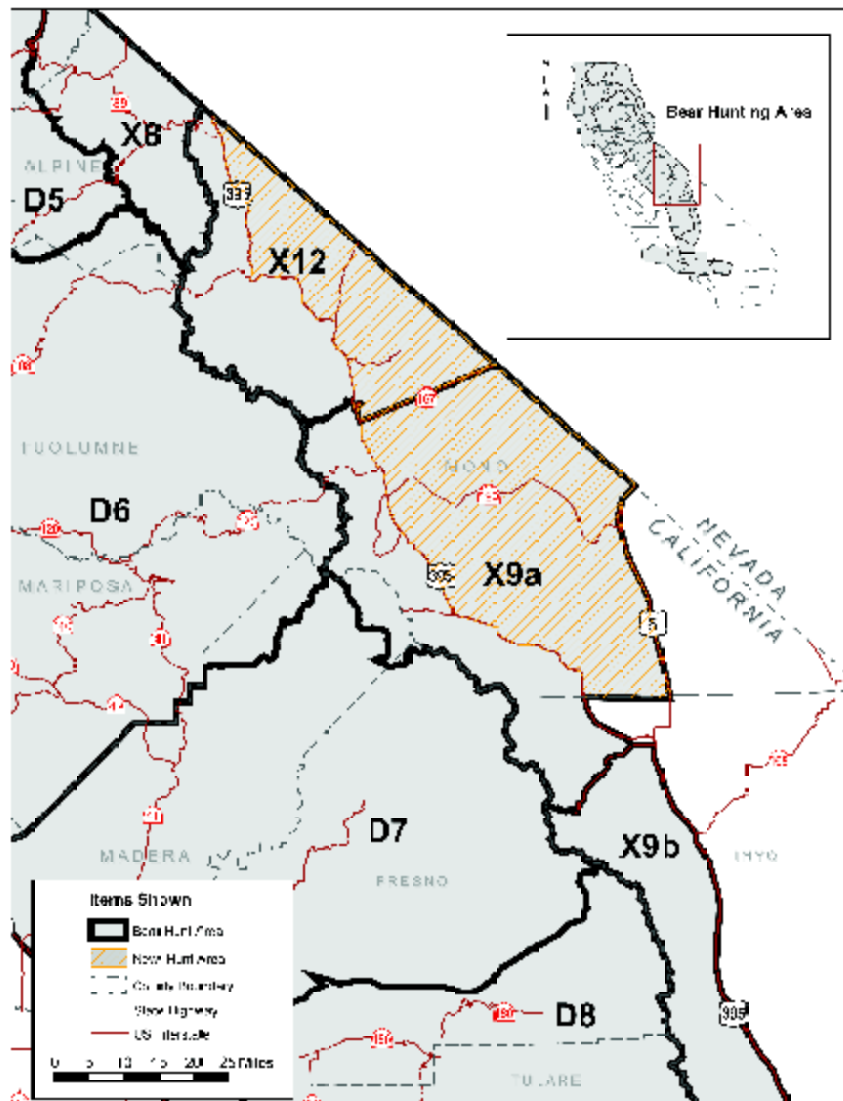
By Doug Updike

There is good news for bear hunters in the Southeastern Sierra zone. In response to requests from bear hunters, a 2004 regulation change enlarges the Southeastern Sierra bear hunting zone to include some new areas east of Highway 395 within deer zones X-12 and X-9a. Currently, bear hunting in the Southeastern Sierra zone is not allowed east of Highway 395.

The new regulation moves the hunt zone boundary from Highway 395 to Highway 6. This modification was made possible by collecting information regarding the presence and relative abundance of bears in that area. The DFG conducted a mail-in survey of deer hunters in zones X-12 and X-9a during the 2002 hunting season to ask about their observations of bears or bear sign east of Highway 395.

Out of 1,855 survey questionnaires mailed on January 17, 2003, a total of 1,008 (54%) were returned. Of these 1,008 respondents, a total of 235 (23%) answered "yes" to seeing either bear or bear sign in zones X-12 and X-9a during the 2002 season. Out of those 235 hunters, a total of 115 hunters, or 11% of all respondents, said that they saw bear(s) or bear sign east of Highway 395.

Hunters were also asked the question "If you saw any bears, how many did you see?" In that portion of zones X-12 and X-9a lying to the west of Highway 395, hunter observations included a total of 159 individual adult bears, 30 individual bear cubs, and 18 reports of sign. In comparison, hunter observations to the east of Highway 395 included 93 individual adult bear, 28 individual bear cubs, and 75 reports of bear sign. This information provides a robust comparison of bear abundance on both the east and west sides of



Highway 395. Bear populations to the east and west sides of Highway 395 are very similar in terms of relative abundance.

In addition to the survey, the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) and DFG jointly reported 22 bears killed along Highway 395 within Mono County from 2001-2003. This high level of road kill suggests that bears readily move back and forth across Highway 395 as they migrate between seasonal habitats or disperse from population centers located on the east and west sides of the highway.

Many areas lying to the east of Highway 395 provide high quality bear habitat capable of supporting self-sustaining bear populations. Two areas in particular, the Sweetwater Mountains and the Glass Mountains, support habitat mosaics comprised of dense conifer and aspen forest, chaparral, meadows and riparian areas. These habitats sustain year-round bear populations because they provide sufficient food, cover and water.

Doug Updike is a Senior Wildlife Biologist and statewide coordinator of the DFG's wild pig and black bear programs.